

ARIZONA VETERANS' SERVICE ADVISORY COMMISSION
3839 N. Third Street, Suite 200 –Phoenix, AZ 85012
Wednesday – January 3, 2007

SPECIAL MEETING

M I N U T E S

Call to Order - The meeting was called to order at 9:03 a.m. by Chairman Ellis. The majority of attendees were participating by teleconference (indicated by TC) and a quorum was established.

Present

Advisory Commissioners

Webb Ellis, Chairperson

Joe Bibich (TC)

Gary Fredricks (TC)

Tom Heaney (TC)

Kenneth Yamanouchi (TC)

Arizona Department of Veterans' Services

Patrick F. Chorprenning, Director

Mike Klier, Assistant Deputy Director

Gabe Forsberg, Strategic Planner

Lee Borgen, ADVS Vets' Benefit Counselor (TC)

Mike Fugate, State Approving Agency (TC)

Absent

Advisory Commissioners

Tom Dingwall, Vice Chair

Linda Fulkerson

Phillip Quochytewa

Opening - Kathy Upchurch and Robert "Bo" Bohach were introduced and the meeting immediately proceeded to comments on the draft letter emailed to the Commissioners on 12/29/06.

Commissioner Comments on the VA Education Letter

There was some deliberation over the exact choice of words to use in the document. Overall, the Commissioners supported the intent. A copy of the draft as revised is attached to the minutes.

Chairman Ellis asked for concurrence that original signed documents should be delivered to the Director of the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services, Governor Janet Napolitano, Speaker of the House Jim Weiers, President of the Senate Tim Bee, the Arizona members of the US Congress delegation, the VA Secretary and Deputy Secretary, and to Sandra Flint, the Director of the VA Regional Office in Phoenix, Arizona. Copies of the letter will be provided to all Arizona lawmakers and to the department heads of the veterans service organizations in Arizona.

Key recipients would receive the letter by certified mail with return receipt requested. As the Commission discussed the recipients of the letter, the consensus was that the letter's distribution could be expanded as deemed appropriate by Chairman Ellis.

Director Chorprenning asked that his staff hand-carry copies of the letter to Arizona lawmakers so that the topic can be discussed on Legislation Day scheduled for January 10, 2007.

Adjournment – The meeting adjourned at 9:40 a.m. by acclamation. The next meeting will be held at 10 a.m. on January 20, 2007 Our Lady of the Valley Catholic Church at 505 N. La Canada Dr., Green Valley, AZ 85614. Those Commissioners interested in riding with Chairman Ellis are advised that his personal van will leave the Arizona State Veteran Home at 2:30 on Friday 1/19/07.

FINAL DRAFT

The Honorable Janet Napolitano
Executive Tower, 9th Floor
1700 W. Washington
Phoenix, AZ 85007

Patrick F. Chorpenning, Director
Arizona Department of Veterans' Services
3839 N. Third Street, Suite 200
Phoenix, AZ 85012

Dear Governor Napolitano and Director Chorpenning:

Dear Governor Napolitano and Director Chorpenning:

The Commission is charged with advising your offices of issues affecting Arizona's veterans. Such an issue arose in an intimidating letter sent to Director Chorpenning on October 4, 2006, concerning veterans' education benefits. The letter, from the US Department of Veterans Affairs Director of Education Services, threatened to deny funding to Arizona for the State Approving Agency (SAA). The SAA is responsible for approving educational programs so that veteran students can obtain their educational benefits. The VA alleged that ADVS had exceeded its authority and the agency director responded on November 3 that it would stop enforcing its policy in order to protect the ADVS State Approving Agency status. The two letters are attached.

At issue is ADVS Office of Veterans' Education Policy #03-3 entitled "Veterans Education Counseling," dated April 14, 2003. The policy stipulates that any veteran enrolling in an Arizona education institution must be informed that there is VA counseling available to help them plan career goals, select schools or training, etc. The policy requires a simple form to be completed by the veteran student. The form merely informs the veteran student of the availability of VA education counseling, it does not **require** counseling. The VA asserts that the policy delays the veteran student in obtaining educational benefits when they request their entitled counseling, but the Commission supports the agency position that veterans are generally not aware of their counseling entitlements.

It is our view that Policy #03-3 is an excellent model for prescribing how Arizona should inform its veterans about their rights to receive counseling. The policy fully conforms to the requirements of the SAA contract, which states, in part, in Paragraph 11, that "...Outreach is defined as an activity designed to promote increased participation and utilization by eligible veterans or persons of VA or DOD educational assistance programs. Emphasis will be given to developing job-readiness skills and employment opportunities for VA program participants. ...Outreach activities by the SAA may include, but are not limited to, employer visits, workshops and presentations, Transition Assistance Program briefings, meetings, mailings, media announcements, telecommunication activities, and computer applications." Thus, in our view, Policy #03-3 is in full compliance with the VA contract. A copy of Policy #03-3 is attached.

The VA has entrusted colleges and universities with its responsibility for education counseling of our veterans. These institutions hire their own "veteran advisors", who may or may not be veterans themselves, to do the work that now the VA prefers to do with pamphlets, brochures, etc. The "veteran advisors" loyalties lie with their employers - not the veteran students. Veteran students frequently enroll and spend their own money for classes because they are not properly informed of their eligibility for the GI Bill. If the veteran student consulted with a VA counselor, the vet would learn about college credit for military training (a minimum of 15 credit hours and probably more). The university paying the "veteran advisor" presumably prefers that the veteran not be told about college education with one of the DOD affiliated institutions since tuition for courses at those institutions is usually at a fraction of the cost of the university. The university also will likely disallow credit for military education and training or charge for any such credit allowed.

We firmly believe that the current position of the VA regarding ADVS education counseling does not serve the individual veterans. A philosophical change within the VA towards its education counseling responsibilities is in order. We believe the only way to strike at the root of this issue is via the open forum in the form of Congressional hearings, and we believe such a forum to be in the absolute best interests of our veterans.

Accordingly, we recommend the following:

- A. The Governor should request the Arizona members of the US Congressional Delegation to thoroughly investigate the issue of veterans' education.
- B. The Governor, in her capacity as Chair of the National Governors Association, recommend that other Governors urge their Congressional Delegations to support Congressional hearings to investigate the issue of veterans' education.
- C. The Director, Arizona Department of Veterans' Services, as a member of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, recommend the same to his counterparts.
- D. By copy of this letter to the President of the Arizona Senate and Speaker of the House, that the Arizona Legislature sponsor a concurrent resolution supporting the same for Arizona's Congressional delegation.

This is a serious problem and our veteran population needs to receive its rightful benefits. The Arizona Veterans' Service Advisory Commission unanimously concurs that the situation requires your immediate attention.

Respectfully,

Webb Ellis
Chairman

Attachments

cc:

The Honorable Larry Craig, Chairman of the US Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs
The Honorable Bob Filner, Chairman of the US House Committee on Veterans Affairs
The Honorable R. James Nicholson, Secretary of Veterans Affairs
The Honorable Gordon H. Mansfield, Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs
The Honorable John McCain, US Senate
The Honorable Jon Kyl, US Senate
The Honorable Rick Renzi (District 1), US House of Representatives
The Honorable Trent Franks (District 2), US House of Representatives
The Honorable John Shadegg (District 3), US House of Representatives
The Honorable Ed Pastor (District 4), US House of Representatives
The Honorable Harry Mitchell (District 5), US House of Representatives
The Honorable Jeff Flake (District 6), US House of Representatives
The Honorable Raúl M. Grijalva (District 7), US House of Representatives
The Honorable Gabrielle Giffords (District 8), US House of Representatives
The Honorable Jim Weiers, Speaker of the House, Arizona House of Representatives
The Honorable Timothy S. Bee, President of the Senate, Arizona Senate
Sandra D. Flint, VA Regional Office Director – Phoenix
Members of the Arizona House of Representatives and Senate
Department Heads of Veterans Service Organizations in Arizona